

WHARTON ESHERICK HOUSE AND STUDIO
1520 Horseshoe Trail
Malvern
Chester County
Pennsylvania

HABS NO. PA-6034

HABS
PA
15-MALV,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
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ADDENDUM
FOLLOWS...

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

House
WHARTON ESHERICK⁺ STUDIO

HABS NO. PA-6034

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Location: 1520 Horseshoe Trail, Malvern, Chester County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: Wharton Esherick was, in the words of a 1970 survey, "the undisputed dean of American craftsman." Starting in 1926 Esherick spent forty years handcrafting additions and alterations to the buildings on this property. The resulting structures combine with the his interior furnishings to display his talent in sculpture, furniture making and architecture. This property is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Description: Four structures--a studio/residence, garage, woodshed, and the Kahn-Esherick workshop--make up the Wharton Esherick studio complex. Running through the well-forested, five-and-a-half acre site is a steep, north-south slope near the northern property line, on which all four buildings sit. A gravel driveway approaches from the west.

The original studio began in 1926 as a one-story sandstone structure including a half-basement with entryway. During construction Esherick raked the mortar from between the stones to create a dry-laid look. On the south, or downhill, side is a cantilevered bay below which are two non-structural wood panels painted green. The front door faced southwest and opened onto an entry vestibule, while a double door on the east led to an outdoor sculpting area. The windows differ: a pair of five-light-over-three-light steel awning windows faces north; the first floor south wall has a large tripartite window. Each of section of the basement includes a pair of six-light casement windows; Esherick hinged the entire panel so it could swing open to provide fresh air. Originally a kitchen, shower, and furnace room occupied the area under the southern half of the building, while the northern half was unexcavated. Esherick used the first floor as his studio: wood flooring covered southern section and the northern half was packed earth. On the southern side, in the storage area, is a single-run stairway.

Initially Esherick lived in an 1839 farmhouse located downhill to the west of his studio. In 1930 he decided to move up to the studio and therefore converted the attic (now called the third floor) into his bedroom. At the same time he built the house's most famous element, a removable spiral staircase whose shaft he carved from one red oak trunk. The tenoned treads, also red oak, are bolted into the shaft but have no support at the outer ends. A characteristically unique detail is the handrail made from a woolly mammoth tusk. To provide more light in his new bedroom Esherick added a dormer to the north side, with three three-by-two-light casement windows.

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The next major change was a two-story addition started in 1940. Built above the vestibule, it cantilevers over to provide shelter to the original entry. A 1947 addition to the entry resulting the northeastern and northwestern facades coming together at an angle. Esherick covered the roof with painted metal and the exterior walls with unpainted board-and-batten oak siding. He created a new entrance on the northwest elevation and randomly placed windows on each side. The second-floor interior contained a new kitchen and a dining room. Immediately above, on what is called the fourth floor, was a guest bedroom. The dining room provides another example of Esherick's craftsmanship: he took "scrap" pieces of applewood and walnut and created an elegant splined hardwood floor. In 1947 Esherick excavated the area under the northern tip of this addition and installed the house's first indoor bathroom. In 1959, after finding termites, Esherick had north end of the first floor excavated to create a sculpture well. He created a new stone stairway below the oak staircase, and stuccoed the walls and floor. The well houses many of Esherick's larger pieces.

The final addition to the house was a 1966 concrete-block silo on the northwestern corner. Reminiscent of both local farm silos and adobe towers in the American southwest, this three-story tower is finished with stucco frescoed with pigments of various colors designed to blend with fall foliage. On the ground floor is a mechanical room, while on the second floor is a kitchen (which connects to the dining room to the rear). On the top floor is another bathroom and a dressing room. The kitchen contains details typical of Esherick's work, such as a gracefully curving cherry countertop and cabinets with rounded cutouts rather than applied hardware. Its construction allowed Esherick to remove the earlier kitchen, converting that space into a vestibule. South of the silo, connected to the west wall of the 1940 addition, is a wood deck supported on stuccoed stone columns.

Northwest of the house along a stone path is the Kahn-Esherick Workshop (1956), which Esherick designed collaboratively with architect Louis Kahn. Its basic plan consists of three adjoining hexagons, but as characteristic of Esherick's work, he altered the original design by making the concrete block walls slightly concave. Stucco with a bluish pigment covers the blocks. Each hexagon has a peaked roof formed from three diamond-shaped copper-covered wood sections. The interior had a hardwood floor, a toilet, and windows along the southern facade. Esherick used each bay for a specific stage as he made furniture: he dried and prepared wood in the eastern bay; shaped it in the center section; and oiled it in the west. Since 1972 Esherick's daughter Ruth and her husband have lived in the workshop, making a number of interior additions in the process.

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Abutting the studio is a garage built in 1927. The dominant feature of this rectangular structure is its gable roof, which features a ridge beam rotated slightly towards the north and south corners. Esherick combined this beam with warped rafters--crowning in along the southeastern eave, crowning out on the other side--to create a hyperbolic paraboloid roof. Wood shingles cover the roof. The walls are made from full logs chinked with mortar. The three garage doors, which open to the northeast, consists of a series of battened panels which roll back along the side walls. The garage has recently been converted into display space, though all recent additions are removable.

The woodshed is a simple rectangular structure with a gable roof. Located east of the house, it faces south. Until recently an outhouse stood nearby; it was disassembled, though all the pieces have been saved.

History: Born in Philadelphia in 1887, Wharton Esherick trained to be a painter. He left the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts two months short of his scheduled 1910 graduation, reputedly because he wanted to develop his own style, not his instructors'. During the next decade Esherick worked as an illustrator; he also bought and moved to the property which would be his home for the next fifty years.¹

During the winter of 1919-20 Esherick taught at an artist's colony in Fairhope, Alabama. He purchased a set of carving tools to make frames for his paintings and soon began making woodcuts. In 1921 he built his first piece of furniture, an elaborate desk which now sits on the first floor of the studio. His reputation spread, and during the 1930s he began to make--sculpt is perhaps a more accurate word--furniture for wealthy patrons. One of his most famous commissions was for the Bok family in nearby Gulph Mills; when the house was demolished Esherick's work went to the Philadelphia Museum of Art.²

It was his own home, however, which best documents Esherick's work. The same 1970 survey which named him the "undisputed dean" argued that "(e)very detail...involved a striking and original use of wood within a unified decorative scheme." These traits made Esherick a model for the next generation of woodworkers; Sam Maloof and Wendell Castle, for example, have cited his influence.

¹ Eddie Nickens, "Listening to Wood," Mid-Atlantic Country (April 1994), 38; Leonard W. Boasberg, "An American Original," Philadelphia Inquirer, ??????.

² Boasberg, "An American Original."

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According to one art historian, "Esherick inspired many younger artists to explore the nature of wood and give it an organic form that expressed its inherent qualities."³ The spiral staircase, which became famous after it sent to the 1939 World's Fair and a 1959 retrospective of his work at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, illustrates these traits particularly well. According to a 1990 examination of modern crafts, the stair "can be seen today as a prototype for organic woodworking that emerged in the craft revival following World War II."⁴ Esherick continued to work until his death in 1970 at age 83. Soon thereafter, the house and studio became a museum.

Sources:

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³ Patricia Conway. *Art for Everyday* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1990).

⁴ Lee Nordness, *Objects: USA* (New York: Viking, 1970), 252-54; Patricia Conway, *Art for Everyday* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1990), 12-20.

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